

Message Text

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ACTION SS-30

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O R 101747Z AUG 74

FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1560

INFO AMEMBASSY BELGRADE

USMISSION BERLIN

AMEMBASSY BUCHAREST

AMEMBASSY BUDAPEST

USMISSION GENEVA

AMCONSUL LENINGRAD

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY PRAGUE

AMEMBASSY SOFIA

AMEMBASSY WARSAW

AMEMBASSY BONN

USMISSION NATO

USDEL MBFR VIENNA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 MOSCOW 12296

EXDIS

GENEVA FOR USDEL CSCE

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, UR, US

SUBJ: U.S.-SOVIET RELATIONS AND THE PRESIDENTIAL
TRANSITION

1. SUMMARY. I HAVE LITTLE DOUBT THAT THE SOVIETS
BELIEVE PRESIDENT FORD WILL CONTINUE OUR POLICY OF SEEKING
A CLOSER AND MORE STABLE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE U.S.S.R.
AND I EXPECT NO MAJOR SHIFTS IN SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY
EITHER TOWARD THE U.S. OR IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA
AS A RESULT OF PRESIDENT NIXON'S RESIGNATION. NOR DO I
THINK NIXON'S RESIGNATION WILL HAVE MUCH EFFECT ON
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BREZHNEV'S POSITION WITHIN THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP. WE

CAN EXPECT THE SOVIET REGIME -- WITH BREZHNEV AT THE HELM -- TO REMAIN ON A DETENTE COURSE TOWARD THE U.S. AND THE WEST IN GENERAL. END SUMMARY.

2. BREZHNEV HAS FELT MOST COMFORTABLE WHEN DEALING WITH WESTERN LEADERS WITH WHOM HE HAS DEVELOPED A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP. NIXON, BRANDT, AND POMPIDOU WERE THE THREE WITH WHOM THAT RELATIONSHIP WAS STRONGEST. NOW ALL THREE ARE GONE. THE DEPARTURE OF BRANDT AND POMPIDOU CAUSED SOME INITIAL SOVIET NERVOUSNESS ABOUT THE COMMITMENT OF THEIR SUCCESSORS TO DETENTE, ACCOMPANIED BY PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SOVIET ASSERTIONS THAT MOSCOW'S COURSE WOULD BE STEADFAST. WE EXPECT THE SAME TO BE TRUE IN THE U.S. CASE AS THE SOVIETS ADJUST TO A NEW PRESIDENT.

3. FORTUNATELY, TWO FACTORS IN THE U.S. SITUATION SHOULD ENCOURAGE THE SOVIETS IN A CONTINUING OVERALL BELIEF THAT THE U.S. REMAINS COMMITTED TO BILATERAL DETENTE. FIRST IS THE FACT THAT SECRETARY KISSINGER WILL REMAIN IN OFFICE. IN HIS PERSON HE EXEMPLIFIES THE CONTINUITY OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY AND -- ON A PSYCHOLOGICAL LEVEL -- HE IS KNOWN AND RESPECTED BY THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP.

4. SECOND IS THE FACT THAT THE SOVIETS HAVE HAD TIME TO PREPARE FOR THE PRESENT SITUATION. WHILE IT TOOK THEM LONGER THAN MANY TO FULLY COMPREHEND THE POSSIBILITY OF NIXON'S FALL, THE WRITING ON THE WALL HAS BEEN VISIBLE TO THEM FOR SEVERAL MONTHS. NIXON DID NOT DEPART IN THE FULL FLOOD OF HIS PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH BREZHNEV. BY THE TIME OF THE SUMMIT MEETING THE SOVIETS PROBABLY HAD BEGUN TO CONSIDER HIM SOMETHING OF A WASTING ASSET, AND SEVERAL TIMES DURING THE VISIT THEY SIDE-STEPPED TOO PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION WITH HIM. AFTER THE SUMMIT SOVIET SOURCES PRIVATELY ASSERTED TO WESTERNERS THAT MORE COULD HAVE BEEN ACCOMPLISHED IN THE STRATEGIC FIELD IF THE PRESIDENT WERE NOT IN DOMESTIC DIFFICULTIES. THERE IS A LARGE SELF-SERVING ELEMENT IN THE CLAIM, BUT IT IS ALSO LIKELY THAT SOME SOVIETS BELIEVED IT. IF SO, MOSCOW MAY BE PREPARED TO TAKE A MORE SERIOUS AND BUSINESSLIKE APPROACH TO SALT IN THE PERIOD AHEAD, FEELING THAT PRESIDENT FORD

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HAS THE CONGRESSIONAL BASE TO GET APPROVAL OF AGREEMENTS REACHED.

5. THE SLOW EROSION OF NIXON'S DOMESTIC POSITION ALSO GAVE THE SOVIETS TIME TO PERSUADE THEMSELVES THAT NIXON'S POLICIES WERE ALMOST CERTAIN TO SURVIVE HIM. THROUGH DISCUSSIONS IN MOSCOW THIS SPRING AND SUMMER WITH KENNEDY AND HARRIMAN ON THE DEMOCRATIC SIDE -- AND SCOTT AND RICHARDSON

ON THE REPUBLICAN -- THEY COULD MEASURE FOR THEMSELVES THE
CONTINUED STRONG SUPPORT FOR THE NORMALIZATION
PROCESS IN THE U.S.

6. THUS, I BELIEVE THE SOVIETS ARE REASONABLY WELL
SATISFIED THAT WE WILL KEEP ON A DETENTE COURSE. THIS
DOES NOT MEAN THERE WILL BE NO ADJUSTMENT PROBLEMS.
GIVEN THEIR INNATE CONSERVATISM AND NEOPHOBIA,
THEY MAY HAVE SOME INITIAL DIFFICULTY GETTING USED TO
THE NEW PRESIDENT. THEY PROBABLY HAVE SOME CONCERN
ABOUT THE PRESIDENT'S EARLIER POLITICAL ORIENTATION, WHICH
THEY MAY SEE AS CONSERVATIVE IN NATURE. MORE BASICALLY,
THEY SIMPLY DON'T KNOW HIM VERY WELL. THE MESSAGE I
DELIVERED TODAY GOT THINGS OFF TO A VERY GOOD START. AN
EARLY MEETING BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT AND DOBRYNIN (WHEN
HE RETURNS) WOULD ALSO HELP. IT IS POSSIBLE, OF
COURSE, THAT BREZHNEV MAY BE RELUCTANT TO SEEK WITH
PRESIDENT FORD THE KIND OF STRONG PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP
HE HAD WITH PRESIDENT NIXON (AND WITH BRANDT AND POMPIDOU).
THE DEPARTURE OF ALL THREE HAS NO DOUBT SOBERED HIM
ABOUT THE DURABILITY OF PERSONAL TIES WITH WESTERN LEADERS.
THRICE BITTEN, HE MAY BE INCLINED TO MOVE TOWARD A SOMEWHAT
MORE FORMAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE U.S. PRESIDENT. THIS
IS NOT HIS NATURAL BENT, HOWEVER, AND THE EVIDENCE THUS
FAR DOES NOT INDICATE AND CHANGE IN HIS APPROACH.

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7. A MORE COMPLEX PROBLEM INVOLVING SOVIET PERCEPTIONS OF THE U.S. IS HOW THEY WILL ASSESS THE ENTIRE WATERGATE DRAMA IN TERMS OF ITS EFFECT ON THE AUTHORITY OF THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH OF THE U.S. GOVERNMENT VIS-A-VIS THE CONGRESS. JUST AS THE MFN TRAVAIL HAS EDUCATED THE SOVIETS ON THE STRENGTH OF CONGRESS, SO SHOULD THE WATERGATE AFFAIR CAUSE THEM TO REVISE EVEN FURTHER UPWARD THEIR VIEW OF CONGRESSIONAL POWER. THEY MAY THEREFORE BE CONCERNED THAT WATERGATE -- AND ITS CULMINATION IN THE NIXON RESIGNATION -- HAS HAD THE EFFECT OF STRENGTHENING THE HAND OF THOSE IN CONGRESS WHO ARE ILL-DISPOSED TOWARD THE SOVIET UNION. THEY WILL HAVE TO BALANCE SUCH A CONCERN AGAINST THE KNOWLEDGE THAT THE PRESIDENT STARTS OUT WITH AN EXCELLENT
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RELATIONSHIP WITH CONGRESS BASED ON HIS LONG EXPERIENCE THERE. THIS MIXTURE OF FACTORS WILL MAKE THE EXECUTIVE-CONGRESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP OF CONSUMING INTEREST TO THE SOVIETS.

8. WHAT OF THE EFFECT OF THE PRESIDENTIAL TRANSFER ON SOVIET POLICY TOWARD THE U.S. AND IN THE OVERALL INTERNATIONAL SPHERE? WILL THERE BE AN EFFORT TO TAKE MARGINAL ADVANTAGE DURING THE TIME OF INITIAL ADJUSTMENT? OR, ON THE CONTRARY, A SOVIET EFFORT TO GIVE PRESIDENT FORD A HONEYMOON PERIOD? I DOUBT THAT EITHER WILL HAPPEN. THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE RESIGNATION AND SUCCESSION SHOULD ALLOW A TRANSITION OF UNIQUE SMOOTHNESS IN THE FOREIGN POLICY FIELD. OUR FOREIGN POLICY APPARATUS IS ALREADY IN PLACE AND AS CAPABLE AS BEFORE OF RESPONDING TO ANY HEIGHTENED SOVIET CHALLENGE. MOREOVER, I DOUBT THA THE SOVIETS WOULD WANT - PARTICULARLY AT FIRST - TO RISK ACTIONS WHICH IN THEIR VIEW MIGHT PUSH THE NEW PRESIDENT IN A MORE HAWKISH DIRECTION. CONVERSELY, I DO NOT SEE ANY PARTICULAR REASON TO BELIEVE THAT THE SOVIETS WILL DO PRESIDENT FORD ANY FAVORS. THEY WILL, FOR EXAMPLE, CONTINUE TO PRESS THEIR INTERESTS VIGOROUSLY IN SUCH AREAS AS THE MIDDLE EAST, CYPRUS AND THE MEDITERRANEAN. IN SUM I EXPECT SOVIET FOREIGN

POLICY TO CONTINUE -- AS OURS WILL -- ON A "BUSINESS-AS-USUAL" BASIS, UNAFFECTED IN ANY MAJOR WAY BY THE SUCCESSION.

9. FINALLY, WILL NIXON'S RESIGNATION AFFECT BREZHNEV'S OWN POSITION IN THE LEADERSHIP? IT SEEMS DOUBTFUL. WHILE BREZHNEV HAD BEEN CLOSELY IDENTIFIED WITH NIXON, THE PERSONAL ANGLE HAS BEEN PROGRESSIVELY MUTED FOR SOME TIME NOW AND IN ANY CASE BREZHNEV NEVER DEPENDED ON IT. HIS POLICY TOWARD THE U.S. AND THE WEST RESTED ON THE ASSUMPTION THAT A CLOSER RELATIONSHIP IS IN THE SOVIET NATIONAL INTEREST. UNLESS U.S. POLICY CHANGES, THAT ASSUMPTION IS NOT LIKELY TO BE CHALLENGED AS A RESULT OF NIXON'S RESIGNATION.
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